

Feast of the Assumption of Mary (C)  
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Whenever we celebrate one of our Marian feast days, giving special honor to the Blessed Virgin Mary, I am always reminded of the story of the early St. Ignatius of Loyola. Fresh from his conversion and filled with zeal for God, he set off one day on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem planning to stop first at the Benedictine Monastery of Montserrat and Manresa where his immature enthusiasm for the faith would be turned into a burning love for God. Riding his mule on the Spanish roads he was overtaken by a Muslim man, and in their conversation they began to speak about our Lady. The Muslim said that it certainly seemed to him that the Virgin had conceived without the aid of man, but he could not believe that in giving birth she remained a virgin. Although Ignatius offered many arguments to the contrary, he could not convince the man of this truth. They parted company, with the Muslim man telling Ignatius to which city he was going.

The young saint was greatly troubled after reflecting upon their conversation. He felt that he had done wrong in allowing such blasphemous things to be said against our Lady and thought that he was obliged to restore her honor by following the man into the city and killing him. He wasn't sure if this was the right course of action either, and so for a long time the debate went on in his head until he finally decided to give the mule free rein. If he turned off to go to the city, he was to assume that he should avenge the dishonor. If the dumb animal continued on to the monastery, he would let the man go. Luckily for the Church, the mule stayed on the main road. And with much grace and work, Ignatius became one of our greatest Saints, particularly adept at discernment of God's will.

A while ago I had a somewhat similar experience, but with less murderous intentions. Speaking with a man who had recently lost his mother, I encouraged him to entrust his sorrow and grief to the Blessed Virgin, not realizing that he had left the Catholic Church. He informed me that he was a bible Christian and said, I quote, "Mary is dead. Is there something else you could recommend?" I was literally speechless, kind of staring at him, with a lot of different and less-than-kind responses going through my head. By God's grace, and out of respect for his mother, I didn't say anything. But I cannot remember a time in my life that I was more offended.

I would like to take this opportunity today, on the Solemnity of the Assumption, to talk about why we Catholics hold Mary so dear, why she is so vital and important to a healthy and mature spiritual life.

Forty years ago, there would not really be any great reason to give such a homily, because back then you could tell a Catholic by their statues and medals of the Blessed Virgin, by their ever-present rosaries. But in the more recent past, for a number of reasons, that sincere filial devotion to the Mother of God, has kind of been lost by many

even well-intentioned and faithful Catholics. Some people think that devotion to our Lady somehow insinuates that her Son just isn't good enough, or they see devotion to the Mary as superfluous —kind of an unneeded addition. But we should be really clear that to think in such a way sets us apart from the 2000 years of saints and holy men and women —including especially the first apostles —who, as St. Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles, devoted themselves to prayer together with Mary the Mother of Jesus.

Why is Mary so essential?

Let's start at the Annunciation. When the Blessed Virgin said *yes* freely to the plan revealed to her by the angel —she spoke our yes as well. She responded, *Fiat* .that is, Let it be Done, on behalf of all people who welcome the Second Person of the Trinity into the world. Mary always said *yes* and says *yes* to the Divine Will. But when we reflect on our own hearts, we probably find that there is that *yes* there, but sometimes it is very small, there is that desire to always *Let it be done* to the divine will, to always be available to God and dutiful and faithful in living out his plan for our lives. But when we reflect on our lives we find that our actions are more often a mixture of *yes* and *no* ,good intentions, but when things get tough —bad follow through. To be close to Mary is to be close to the one who said *yes* to the joy of Christmas and *yes* to the pain of Calvary. She is the one who stood close to her Son as he was admired when he astounded the guests at the wedding feast of Cana, and stood close to her Son when he was blasphemed as he hung dying on the Cross. She inspires us by her life, and wins for us the graces from her Son so that we too might always say *yes* to the Father.

Why is she so essential?

Mary directs us to her Son and inspires faith in Jesus. Did you ever notice that line in St. John's Gospel which concludes the wedding feast of Cana, after the great miracle, when Jesus gave that superabundance of wine to the newlywed couple? It was at Mary's suggestion that Our Lord began his public divine mission, by working this first sign —it was at that same wedding feast where we are given the last recorded words of the Blessed Virgin Mary which echo in the hearts of all who love her, *Do whatever he tells you.* ” The story concludes by saying it was because of that miracle, inspired by the His Mother, that the disciples began to believe in Him. ”

Even the Apostles who spent three years with our Lord begged Him, *Lord increase our faith.* It is a prayer that I often repeat, as do most who are striving to live as Christians. What better help do we have than she who first inspired faith in the hearts of the Disciples. The Church has always held out to us this maxim, *Ad Iesum per Mariam,* ” *To Jesus Through Mary.* ”

Isn't Mary also our model at Prayer? One of the scenes that had the most affect on me in *The Passion of the Christ* was Mel Gibson's glimpse into the hidden life of Nazareth — when Mary called Jesus from his work building a table to come and eat. The playfulness and natural affection between the Mother and her Child kind of surprised me. I don't think I had ever really imagined before the reality of that close relationship. Thus, the

Blessed Virgin teaches us how to relate to Our Lord in prayer. With a naturalness and simplicity, speaking to him of even the most mundane things, our daily life should always include this genuine, unpretentious, and heartfelt conversation with our Lord in prayer.

She is our great comfort in the midst of family struggles, from his birth in a cave, and the flight into Egypt, Mary understands the difficulties that we face.

She is for people, and I know there are many, who struggle with their children who are seemingly lost. Meditate upon the Finding in the Temple, and try imagining the fear of Mary when they realized that the Son of God was lost to them.

In grief and sorrow, we meditate upon the one who held the lifeless body of life itself.

Did you notice where Pope John Paul II is spending this holyday? At the renowned Shrine of Our Lady at Lourdes in southwestern France. A half-million pilgrims will join him in prayer to Jesus through Mary at this sacred grotto where the Immaculate Mother of God appeared to St. Bernadette in 1858. He goes, the Holy Father tells us, not as the pope, but as a sick, frail, dying old man; he goes, the Holy Father tells us, to be with his mother; because he knows, as St. Phillip Neri taught, There is no more excellent way to obtain graces from God than to seek them through Mary, because her Divine Son cannot refuse her anything! And he goes as well, on this Feast of the Assumption to be reminded of the next step on his journey of life, eternal union with His Lord; he goes for a reminder of our noble destiny.

We call her blessed with St. Elizabeth who was filled with the Holy Spirit, because as she sings in the Magnificat, in the beautiful Gospel of the Visitation we hear today: All generations will call me blessed, because of all the great things the Almighty has done for her.

What the so-called bible Christian (hopefully just insensitive and without malice) did not understand, is that we love her, because she is our Mother. Behold thy Mother. By these words, Mary, by reason of the Love she bears, became the mother, not only of St. John, but of all us. ”

And on the Feast of the Assumption we celebrate that she is our Hope, as we pray in the preface for today's Mass: Today the Virgin Mother of God was taken up into heaven to be the beginning and the pattern of the Church in its perfection, and a sign of hope and comfort for your people on their pilgrim's way. In bringing her, body and soul, to be with Him forever in heaven, the Lord not only rewards her, but powerfully reminds us of the destiny that awaits us. She shared in the full-fruits of her Son's triumph over sin and death. Where she has gone, we hope to go. As she escaped eternal death, so will we. What God has done for her, He intends to do for us.

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